

Grade 11 - Informational

Loren Eiseley 1907–1977

“Loren Eiseley . . . seems always to have looked at the world with wonder,” one reviewer wrote in the *Washington Post Book World* when discussing the work of scientist and writer Loren Eiseley. Eiseley wrote nonfiction books about the natural world as well as several volumes of poetry, books of essays, and his own autobiography. Another reviewer said, “He’s a writer so good he can stop you . . . in your tracks for a day or a week.”

Early Interests

Loren Corey Eiseley was born in Lincoln, Nebraska, on September 3, 1907. His family moved frequently when he was a child. In his autobiography, *All the Strange Hours*, Eiseley writes of a childhood move to Aurora, Nebraska, where he spent his hours wandering the countryside observing the natural world. In a high school English essay, he boldly wrote: “I want to be a nature writer.” As an adult, Eiseley reflected on this essay and realized that he had accomplished his goal.

Eiseley credited a kind uncle with encouraging his thinking by taking him to museums. They visited the fossil collection at the University of Nebraska Museum. Eiseley was fascinated, and this experience influenced his later decision to become an archaeologist.

Finding a Focus

After graduating from high school in Lincoln in 1925, Eiseley attended the University of Nebraska where he studied zoology and English. He joined the staff of the university’s literary journal, *Prairie Schooner*, and submitted several poems to the magazine.

In 1928, Eiseley faced financial hardships and health problems that forced him to drop out of college. He was diagnosed with a lung disease, so doctors encouraged him to go west where clear mountain air or dry desert air might promote recovery. For the next several years, Eiseley traveled the country, working odd jobs and traveling on freight trains like the hobos of the day. The Great Depression (1929–1939) had put thousands of men out of work, and Eiseley was not alone in leading an itinerant life with no fixed residence.

Eiseley eventually returned to the University of Nebraska, focusing on the fields of archaeology and paleontology. He participated in summer digs for the university’s natural history museum. He considered the badlands of western Nebraska as “one of the great fossil beds of the North American age of mammals.” There, animal bones protruded from cliffs or lay exposed in dry riverbeds. He found fossils of dirk-toothed

cats; titanotheres, an extinct group of large-hoofed mammals; and oreodonts, prehistoric hogs. Eiseley later wrote, “The place enchanted me.” Eiseley had found his calling. From that time on, he focused his studies on the natural world and human interactions with it. He graduated in 1933 with majors in both English and anthropology—the study of peoples and cultures.

From Nebraska, Eiseley went to the University of Pennsylvania. He earned a Ph.D. in anthropology, focusing on the study of humans’ relationship to nature. The way in which time impacts both people and their environments became the focus of his later writing. He taught at the University of Kansas and Oberlin College in Ohio before returning to the University of Pennsylvania in 1947. He spent the rest of his career in Pennsylvania.

Pursuing a Writing Career

After returning to Pennsylvania, Eiseley began writing books based on science. His writing inspired a sense of wonder that continues to appeal to readers today. Eiseley’s popular first book, *The Immense Journey* (1957), is a collection of writings about the history of humanity. Between 1960 and 1975, he wrote six more books. In *The Invisible Pyramid*, published shortly after the first moon landing, Eiseley contemplates the vastness of the universe and the limits of human knowledge.


His skill as a writer made difficult topics accessible to general readers. He encouraged readers to think about time—past, present, and future—and how it relates to the journey of the universe and the individual. He also wrote about the interrelationship between living things.

A Lasting Contribution

Essays and poetry provided Eiseley yet another outlet for his thinking about nature, time, and human development. Eiseley spent his life searching for answers and meditating about time and how it impacts human understanding and the natural world in which we live. He was not only a respected scientist, but he also earned a place in the world of the arts.

In 1971, Eiseley was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, a most unusual honor for a scientist. Loren Eiseley died in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1977, but his books and poems have made a lasting contribution to science and the arts.

Timeline of Events in Loren Eiseley's Life



1907	—	born in Lincoln, Nebraska
1925	—	graduates from high school
1933	—	graduates from the University of Nebraska
1937	—	earns a Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania
1938	—	marries Mabel Langdon
1957	—	publishes first book, <i>The Immense Journey</i>
1971	—	is elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters